

## Course Outline & Initial Lectures

### Week 1 (day 1)

A note for students: for study or latecomers I am providing the notes that provided the main points of my lectures the first couple of weeks of the class. I will not be providing lecture outlines throughout the class, so be sure to attend class and take good notes.

### Threefold structure for the class

The course will unfold in three main endeavors: (1) understanding worldviews (2) developing analytic frameworks, and (3) analyzing social phenomena at the intersection of religion, spirituality, nature, and popular culture.

My hope: that you'll find this course unusually interesting and fun. But it may also be dangerous, to preconceptions; to the ways you are comfortable and used to thinking about religion and our natural surrounds.

But first. . .

### Questions for starters about key course concepts:

#### I. What is culture?

(derived from various dictionaries):

- 1) culture (anthropology) The learned patterns of behavior and thought that help a group adapt to it's surroundings.
  - the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations
  - **the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time**
- 2) culture more broadly (The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively).
- 3) the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, institution, organization, or activity

#### II. What is popular culture?

Wiki: "ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture of the early to mid 20th century and the emerging global mainstream of the late 20th and early 21st century. Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society."

The term generally evokes “the qualities of mass appeal” or being fashionable

Pop Culture--although big, mercurial, and slippery to define--is really an umbrella term that covers anything currently in fashion, all or most of whose ingredients are familiar to the public-at-large. (Gloria Steinem, *Outs of pop culture*, in *LIFE* magazine, 20 August 1965, p. 73)

### **III. When you consider the term, does ‘popular culture’ evoke positive or negative associations, and why?**

Popular culture is sometimes degraded as banal, superficial, sensationalistic, or crassly commercial, even promoting consumerism and thereby hindering authentic spiritual or religious quests.

Others degrade popular culture as that of the stupid or uneducated masses, either those who cannot appreciate the best of human culture in the arts, and is thus contrasted with the supposed high culture of a society’s intelligentsia.

Yet other times it is viewed as a means of social control, as an ideology designed by just such elites to justify and perpetuate their privileges.

The Wiki entry also accurately notes that "certain currents of pop culture may originate from, (or diverge into) a subculture, representing perspectives with which the mainstream popular culture has only limited familiarity." And so, popular culture can be seen as in process, a wellspring for creativity. It is even sometimes a wellspring for subversion – for ideas out of the mainstream, whether out of the mainstream of elite, dominant, or mass understandings.

So, by examining the processes and products of popular culture we can see emerging trends and possibilities. In this class, we’ll be especially interested in the way popular culture expresses, promotes, and possibly presages, broad cultural changes in the ways people understand their spiritual relationships with the environments they inhabit.

### **IV. What is ideology?**

Ideas, aims, and assertions that constitute a eco/social/political program. In common parlance ideology is often assumed to be a bad thing but we will use the term in a neutral way, and speak precisely when we want to critique or praise an ideology.

### **V. What is nature?**

Everything; the built environment, the shopping mall, the wilderness reserve, the biosphere, the seen and unseen universe. Humans are animals, part of nature. We are not unnatural and although we do modify the nature that we eat, dig, scoop, cut, poop, build, and so forth. As such, it is all potentially subject to our critical scrutiny, and in this

course, we'll be focusing on the nexus between what we're calling religion, nature, and popular culture.

## VI. What is religion? (Answer: a soon coming attraction).

### Understanding Worldviews/Cosmovisions (first course movement)

#### Worldviews / Cosmovisions ~ Perceptions about the biosphere & universe, the human place in it, and the meaning of it.

- I. 'Religion', 'Spirituality' and the 'family resemblance' school of social analysis.
  - a. Comparative religion (in the history of the Western, academic study of religion)
    - i. Stage one: how do other/colonized people's beliefs and practices resemble or differ from ours? What sort of non-material divine being (or beings) to they have? Why are they different?
      1. If you don't have things similar to us – invisible, divine, all-powerful spirits, you don't have religion and are inferior to us – and thus, it is natural that we will reign over you.
    - ii. Stage two: A move toward analysis of the religious dimensions of cultural systems without misleading imposition of a priori categories and understandings (usually Western ones).
      1. Focus on what people understand to be the nature of reality, including ultimate or invisible realities but not only those.
      2. Look for phenomena that may not, given prior constructs, be understood as 'religion' or 'cosmovision' or myths.

#### Excursus: What is a Myth?

- a. Miriam Webster definition of **myth**:
  - i. Myths can refer to an unfounded or false notion; or a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence; but that is not the definition we'll use in this class; instead:
  - ii. a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon.
  - iii. a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; *especially* : one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society
  - iv. **BT: Myths**: stories that “establish a world”, express a worldview and the values of a community. Myths usually involve **cosmogonies**, or stories about how the world came to be the way it is, which endeavor to explain the challenges and predicaments of life.

- v. BT: Myths, like parables, can also subvert the world, delegitimizing it, or leaving off at mystery, or loose ends.

**So, with this background in place, What is Religion?**

My short answer is, ‘heck if I know.’ And this is why in this class we will take the “family resemblance approach” to the study of religious, and religion-resembling social phenomena.

- I. ‘family resemblance approach’ (described in detail in DGR, brief description now). Beliefs and practices related to invisible divine beings are not essential to what will be the operational definition of ‘religion’ in this course.
  - a. ‘being bound and connected to’ . . . .
  - b. what is considered sacred in some way (define).
  - c. In short, religions involve the search for meaning, the quest for relationship, intimacy, and belonging; for understanding one’s place in the grand scheme of things.
    - i. To do this they must grapple with life’s ‘limit-situations’, the struggle for survival, hatred, evil, suffering, and death, and still find meaning and even hope.

**SEVERAL OTHER THINGS ABOUT ‘RELIGION’ I WOULD LIKE TO EMPHASIZE AT THIS POINT: HYBRIDITY, BRICOLAGE, CONTESTATION, CONFLICT, AND THUS, MALEABILITY AND CHANGE.**

- I. Hybridity and Bricolage
  - a. E.g., Zeitgeist movie clip illustrates the tendency viz. the Near Eastern Creation stories.
    - i. [Zeitgeist the Movie](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrHeg77LF4Y) (view Part I, 13:21-40:10)
  - b. Hybridity and Bricolage help to explain why religions change, they are malleable (within certain limits, for if they change too much, they become something else, usually starting with the label ‘heresy’ of some kind).
  - c. Religious phenomena are contested: between traditions or types, and within traditions and types. These contestations take place in complex and complicated ways, influenced by multiple natural and cultural variables. All these variables are subject to change and they are in reciprocal, ever-unfolding, processes of change.
    - i. And these changes continue even when conservative individuals and groups resist change, if more slowly.

For this reason there are inevitably blurry lines between and within religious cultures, blurry lines between what is religion and outside of the boundaries of religion, blurry lines between culture and the subset called ‘popular culture.’

Exploring these with special attention to the 'religious' or 'spiritual' (or religion-resembling) dimensions of the complex relationships between our species and nature culture is the quest for this course.

Moreover, I will be assuming that this quest is for bio-cultural understanding, since human beings and their cultures are fully nested within natural systems, both arising from and being shaped by them, and acting within and transforming them. Indeed, humans and nature have been and ever will be in reciprocal relationship and production. In this class we will examine these processes in our own cultures. Indeed, I will ask you to look at your own personal lives and understandings as entwined in these processes, as shaped by and at least in some small way shaping them. In short, I will ask you to look at the world as data, everything in it, including your neighbor, as well as yourself.

This might be uncomfortable, or even dangerous. It might trouble your typical understandings of yourself, your mates, your surroundings, your worldviews. But if Aristotle was right that "the unexamined life is not worth living" – it is precisely such a trouble approach to life that the real, valuable living begins.

So, here is your assignment before Thursday:

- 1) Read the Genesis passage in the syllabus.
- 2) Watch the Zeitgeist video (at least the assigned 30 minutes of it).
- 3) If you possibly can, read the other short assignments for this week before Thursday; otherwise, by no later than this weekend.

**ON THURSDAY WE WILL BEGIN REVIEWING THEORIES ON THE RELIGION/NATURE/CULTURE RELATIONSHIP, WHICH WE WILL USE AS LENSES INTO RELIGION, NATURE, AND POPULAR CULTURE (1500 WORDS)**

Week 1 (day two, 1hr, 50 minutes)

**Analytic and Critical Lenses (second course movement): first, about religion in general, then, about popular culture specifically**

**First, a quick primer on types of religions**

- I. Main types of religious belief and perception
  - a. Animistic & Polytheistic; Pagan & Indigenous.
  - b. Organicist, Pantheist, Panentheist
    - \* Today, we might call all of these 'nature religions', for nature is sacred in some way, or there is an emphasis on right relations with other-than-human persons in nature.
  - c. Axial Age Religions
    - i. Asian
      1. SouthAsian / Vedic / Hindu
      2. SouthAsian / Buddhist
      3. EastAsian, China / Confucian

- 4. EastAsian, China / Taoism
- ii. Western / Abrahamic
  - 1. Judaism
  - 2. Christianity
  - 3. Islam
- d. Other key terms for today or eventually:
  - i. Anthropomorphism
  - ii. Anthropogenic
  - iii. Anthropocentrism

### **Classical Theories of Religion (various / classic / influential)**

- All involve a huge shift, from belief to the quest to understand why people believe in unseen worlds and beings, and to understand the functions of religion in human societies.
- They are all in some way wrestling with the 'nature variable' with regard to religious belief and perception.
- They generally share the view that religion is an interpretation the world and a strategy to influence it.

### **Theories on the Natural, and later, the evolutionary origins of Religion**

These introduce us to

- (1) the academic study of religion in general;
- (2) theories about the origins of religion (why we have such phenomena);
- (3) understandings of how religions function in human societies.

They also provide some initial lenses for viewing contemporary phenomena at the nexus of religion, nature and popular culture

#### *Pre-Darwinian Theories*

### **Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778)**

Q: What is Rousseau best known for?

**Nature Romanticism:** "Rousseau . . . heaped such praise on the sublimity of wilderness scenes in the Alps that it stimulated a generation of artists and writers to adopt the Romantic mode."

In common with other philosophers of the day, Rousseau looked to a hypothetical State of Nature as a normative guide.

Rousseau criticized Hobbes for asserting that since man in the "state of nature . . . has no idea of goodness he must be naturally wicked; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue". On the contrary, Rousseau held that "uncorrupted morals" prevail in the "state of nature."

Rousseau asserted that the stage of human development associated with what he called "savages" was the best and most optimal in human development, between the less-than optimal extreme of brute animals on the one hand and the extreme of decadent civilization on the other. "...nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state, when placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man." [21]

Referring to the stage of human development, which Rousseau associated with savages, Rousseau wrote:

**"Hence although men had become less forbearing, and although natural pity had already undergone some alteration, this period of the development of human faculties, maintaining a middle position between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more one reflects on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to upheavals and the best for man, and that he must have left it only by virtue of some fatal chance happening that, for the common good, ought never to have happened. The example of savages, almost all of whom have been found in this state, seems to confirm that the human race had been made to remain in it always; that this state is the veritable youth of the world; and that all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species."** [22]

#### The State of Nature & the Social Contract:

JJR: "The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. [GREAT REPRESSION, INEQUALITY AND SUFFERING FOLLOWED] ... Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody." *Discourse on Inequality*, 1754

#### **Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797), Irish statesman and member, British House of Lords**

Burke is best known for his counter-revolutionary writings against the French revolution, but his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is a remarkable work that deserves to be considered one of the earliest examples of the scholarly study of religion. One can perceive his conservative political philosophy within its pages – but it is primarily a work that purports to explain how the affective states that he calls the sublime and the beautiful arise from the human experience in nature. **He contended that the experience of the sublime is evoked by and thus associated with the feeling of "Astonishment" that comes from encounters with great and terrifying power:**

**The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other [thing]. . . Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect.**

In these “inferior effects” we can see that he links the experience of Astonishment, and its aftermath, to the perception of the Holy, whether this is conceived of as a sacred place, object, or divinity.

**Note especially the spiritual epistemology: the sacred is experienced especially in wild, untamed, nature, as it is found, for example, in powerful oceans, dangerous dark forests, and encounters with fierce, wild animals.**

Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous. There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. . . . [T]he ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.

Moreover, the angry cries of animals “may be productive of the sublime” and the *least-tame* and most-powerful animals evoke the sublime.

Beauty, on the other hand, Burke associated with mere pleasures, and with the emotion commonly called love:

The sublime and beautiful are built on principles very different, and that their affections are as different: the great has terror for its basis; which, when it is modified, cause that emotion in the mind, which I have called astonishment; the beautiful if founded on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling, which is called love.

Unlike Rousseau, who found a close association between beauty and the sublime in nature, Burke found natural beauty (and its associate emotion love) to be different from and inferior to Astonishment and the sublime. This difference also reflects their political disagreements. While Rousseau believed that in a true state of nature there is sublime harmony, equality, beauty, and contentment, for Burke, the natural state is one in which the powerful (people and animals) inevitably evoke feelings of the sublime in others and thereby easily and properly rule over them.

There are, nevertheless, important affinities between these otherwise competing visions. Both Rousseau and Burke are enlightenment figures who started not with religious



revelation but with sensory experience and observation. . . . This turn toward the sensuous experience in nature as the key to both secular and sacred knowledge became central to the Romantic Movement, which then fertilized the ground for many subsequent forms of nature religion in the West.

**Immanuel Kant** (1724 –1804), German Philosopher of the Enlightenment, famous for his dictum I think therefore I am and his *Critique of Pure Reason*, to counter David Hume’s skepticism, he also linked the experience of the beautiful and sublime, or the sacred.

**David Hume** (1711-1776) (Scottish Philosopher) in *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) wrote:

**“There is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good will to every thing that hurts or pleases us. Hence . . . trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion.”**

All these 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists -- Rousseau, Burke, Kant, and Hume -- saw nature itself as the source for the direct human apprehension of the sacred.

We can ask, do we find evidence for their understandings in popular culture today? Do we think their theories are compelling? Or do we need another approach?

*Post-Darwinian Theories:  
The turn toward evolutionary explanations of religion*

**Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882)** heavily influential on many subsequent theorists, esp, *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871)

**Almost in passing discussion in the *Descent of Man***, Darwin observed that dogs mistake inanimate objects for living beings and asserted that religion had its origin in a similar misapprehension by early humans, such as, when a dog chases an umbrella tumbling in the wind. [**John Lubbock**, a close friend of Darwin, John Lubbock, made a similar claim in *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* (1870).]

**Max Müller (1823-1900);** German, comparative religion founder, his family rooted in European Romanticism.

Müller is considered the father of the academic study of religion. **He traced the origin of Indo-European religion to religious metaphors and symbolism grounded in the natural environment, especially the sky and sun. The origin of religion was in an emotional connection with nature, he thought, and typically even involved the worship of natural objects and forces** (Vedic religion key focus). But Müller was

dubious about Darwin (esp. continuity between human and other beings) and influenced by European Romanticism Vedic religion was nature worship.

### **James G. Frazer (1854-1941); Scottish social anthropologist.**

*The Golden Bough* (1890), detailed the similarities among magical and religious beliefs around the world. **Frazer posited that human belief progressed through three stages: primitive magic and polytheism, replaced by monotheistic forms of religion, in turn replaced by science and among civilized peoples to the "despiritualization of the universe"** (Frazer, 1926, p. 9).

Most scholarly observers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to agree that the nature spirituality characteristic of early peoples and the world's remaining "primitives" eventually would be supplanted by higher, monotheistic forms, or no religion at all.

Frazer approvingly quoted Müller's *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873): **"The worship of the spirits of the departed is perhaps the most widely spread form of natural superstition all over the world"** (Frazer, 1926, p. 18).

The idea of religion as involving and rooted-in nature-related beliefs and practices became widely influential, as did Frazer's "worship of nature" rubric. Frazer wrote:

**[By] the worship of nature, I mean. . . the worship of natural phenomena conceived as animated, conscious, and endowed with both the power and the will to benefit or injure mankind. Conceived as such they are naturally objects of human awe and fear. . . to the mind of primitive man these natural phenomena assume the character of formidable and dangerous spirits whose anger it is his wish to avoid, and whose favour it is his interest to conciliate. To attain these desirable ends he resorts to the same means of conciliation which he employs towards human beings on whose goodwill he happens to be dependent; he proffers requests to them, and he makes them presents; in other words, he prays and sacrifices to them; in short, he worships them. Thus what we may call the worship of nature is based on the personification of natural phenomena** (Frazer 1926, p. 17).

### **E.B. Tylor (1832-1917). British Anthropologist,**

Tylor's key work was *Primitive Culture* (1871), and in it he articulated a theory about religion originating in Animism, a term he coined.

Animism, he argued, is rational for primitive people, arising from biological problem of understanding difference between living and dead bodies, and dream and waking states of consciousness.

This gave rise to notion of souls that travel, invisible beings, ancestral spirits, and so forth. Tylor thus saw Animism as a form of anthropomorphism.

Bron Taylor 1/13/13 10:17 AM

**Comment [1]:** [End week one; three hours; begin week two]

Animism for Tylor, then, was a belief that the natural world is full of intelligences, even spiritual intelligences, divinities, and sometimes also evil spirits or demons. Generations of anthropologists have shown that for animists, the presences can be malicious or beneficent, subterranean, terrestrial, aquatic, or otherworldly.

**Stewart Guthrie**, a contemporary anthropologist, took a similar approach to Hume and Tylor in *Faces in the Clouds* (1995), arguing that religion is the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things and events:

**Inevitably and automatically, we all anthropomorphize. We see punishment in accidents, faces in clouds, and purpose everywhere. Such illusory perceptions tell us more about ourselves than about the world. Most arrestingly, they tell us about the kind of thought and action, and the kind of experience, we call religion** (1995, viii).

*Note Guthrie's observation about the tendency for humans to see divine agency in natural events, including natural disasters. Such beliefs remain very common today, and very much infused in the ways popular culture entwined perceptions about both nature and religion.*

Asserting that religion is the result of some anthropomorphic tendency as Hume did, Guthrie also argued, does not explain why we attribute intentions to what may in reality actually be inert or neutral aspects of our environment.

**Guthrie contended that perceiving agency in nature where it does not exist enhances survival, and that is why people have often been religious. In his words:**

**Uncertain of what we face, we bet on the most important possibility because if we are wrong we lose little and if we are right we gain much. Religion, asserting that the world is significantly humanlike, brings this strategy to its highest pitch** (38).

In summary, for Guthrie, **anthropomorphism is the genesis of religion because it is a strategy of perception that bears favorably on survival.** One can hear the echo of Darwin in Guthrie's new theory" of religion. But the theory was not entirely new.

**Walter Burkert. *Creation of the sacred: tracks of biology in early religions*** (Harvard University Press, 1996).

**method:**

Burkert utilized an evolutionary- anthropological approach (a hybrid methodology of sorts) to develop his theory. He claimed that "general anthropology will in the end have to merge with biology" (Burkert, xii). Thus, he helped introduce a new kind of evolutionary and ecological explanation about the complex relationship between *homo sapiens* and their habitats.

## Key arguments & quotes:

**“religion . . . as a long-lived hybrid between the cultural and the biological traditions.” (p. 20) “The impetus of biological survival appears internalized in the codes of religion ... Religion keeps to the tracks of biology” (33).**

**Nature often presents some unexplainable circumstance that a human population must deal with, such as death, famine, disease, harsh weather, illness, disaster, and other situations of distress. These universally evoke a religious response from all known civilizations (39). Whether it is evidence of finger sacrifices in Paleolithic caves (39), magical flight stories within Greek myth (44), Kumbabos’s castration (47), Hebrew circumcision (49) or sacrifice for salvation (51), humans universally have constructed religions in the flight from danger and the triumph over anxiety. Such phenomena are explainable from a biological perspective – and are a universally effective way of managing the woes of life throughout the history of civilization (55).**

**Primordial religion is found in the tracks of biology as a response to the terrors of existence and the imperatives of “coherence, stability and control within this world,” ... “gladly accepting the existence of nonobvious entities...” (177)**

**Understanding sacrifice and the experience of being prey is critical: Human sacrifice is ethologically analogous to a herd’s feeling of relief and safety after a carnivore has taken one of their own members (2001:55). He suggests:**

**[this] instinctive program seems to command: take another one, not me. This ancient program is still at work in humans, still fleeing from devouring dangers and still making sacrifices to assuage and triumph over anxiety.** In this perspective sacrifice is a construct of sense that has proved almost universally effective through the history of civilization.  
[2001:55]

Burkert drew on the work of Vladimir Propp and argued that mythology reflects basic patterns based in evolutionary reality. **Religious rituals and beliefs, then, derive largely from pre-human experiences.** “The pattern of causality, of guilt established by transcendent diagnosis in situations of disaster, is universal and aboriginal and typical of the human mind and human behavior in general; **it has its avatar in the behavior of an animal pursued by a predator or caught in a trap**” (125). Burkert believes that all basic aspects of religion originate in this way.

Finger sacrifices/paw sacrifices showed how many cultures/animals practice “partial sacrifice for the sake of survival in situation of pursuit, of threat and anxiety (Burkert, 41). He also discussed how scapegoats were given so that one person could be used to save others (Burkert, 51).

Religion remains in human societies because of “a certain survival fitness” (13). However, this need not mean that religion emerges as a function of the genes (17). Instead, religion is conditioned by the natural world to provide advantages to believers and pass on learned behaviors beneficial for survival. For Burkert, religion chiefly reflects primal fears, as he concludes, “I propose the existence of biological patterns of actions, reactions, and feelings activated and

elaborated through ritual practice and verbalized teachings, with anxiety playing a foremost role” (177).

But Bukert does not think that contemporary religion is a more evolved form than primitive animism or magic, and that indeed, by trying to teach unchanging ‘eternal truths’ and to make sure that beliefs and attitudes remain unchanged, it may lead to maladaptive beliefs and behaviors.

Yet,

“the success of religion may be attributed to its providing a heightened endurance in the face of catastrophe, encouraging procreation even in desperate circumstances” (16).

## **Wrapping up this introduction to evolutionary understandings of religion**

A host of new cognitive scientists and evolutionary biologists are today working to understand scientifically religious beliefs and perceptions, namely, how and why beliefs and practices related to supposed invisible beings or forces evolved, and whether and if so how are such beliefs ecologically and socially adaptive or maladaptive. This is a fascinating field of study and beyond the scope of this class. But knowing something about these theories can open up some interesting questioning on our part as we view motion pictures and other expressions of popular culture. Can we perceive evidence in them for these theories?